Process for Writing Tasks

Rhode Island Skills Commission

Explanation and Considerations for Use

This document was developed by the Rhode Island Skills Commission. It is an example of one model for writing tasks and can be used as guidance for schools writing their own assignments/tasks for inclusion in a graduation portfolio. The tasks that are developed using this process would also be appropriate to use for end-of-course assessments

This tool was created and/or compiled by The Rhode Island Department of Education and The Education Alliance at Brown University, with the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

http://www.ride.ri.gov/highschoolreform/dslat/
October, 2005

Process for Writing Tasks

Task writing is a useful skill for any teacher to have. Since teachers already spend a large amount of their time testing students, tasks can help them do this in a way that is clearly connected to standards and their curriculum and provides feedback that can strengthen instruction.

Tasks connect and provide feedback in the following ways:

- Tasks are clearly connected to standards (and/or GSEs) as well as curriculum. Consequently, tasks create a higher level of coherence within and between classrooms in a school (and across schools).

- Tasks clearly state what it is they assess. This message gets communicated by the standards behind a task, the task prompt, and by the rubric used to score the task. By stating what the task assesses up front, students have a better chance of understanding what they need to learn and teachers have a guide for how to instruct.

- Tasks give consistent information back from the assessment process. Since tasks use rubrics, each student's work is assessed on the same set of explicitly stated criteria.

- Tasks provide feedback to students that can be used to help them learn the proficiencies tested by the task. The inherent message in a scored task is that the student should go back and develop the proficiencies that are not at standard.

- Tasks provide feedback to teachers that can be used to help students meet standards the next time they take a similar task. The rubric of a task should have lots of information about how a teacher can re-teach the proficiencies on a task.

So, there are lots of good reasons to use tasks, but how do you write a good task? One answer is that there are several different ways to write good tasks. Here are the major ways the RI Skills Commissions uses in its network.

Use old tasks to create new tasks. We call this "cloning" and have materials to help you do this. Although there are difficulties with this method (see "Extended Task Issues and Resolutions" and "TV Violence Extended Task #2" for a summary of our experience with extended tasks last year), changing the prompt in a task without changing the task is the easiest way to create a new, usable task. Its drawback is that it is only good if you want to assess what the original task assesses. If you want to assess something different, you need to write a new task.

Expand an on-demand task to create an extended task. Often, on-demand tasks create interest in students and they want to do further work in the area (see the on-demand and extended rubrics for the related "TV Violence" tasks). Some of the ways students can expand on the work is to do research, interview people, and write reports. Some of the standards that can be used to expand an on-demand task into an extended task are:

- E2a: produces a report;
- E2e: produces a persuasive essay;
- E3c: prepares and delivers an individual presentation;
- E4b: analyzes and subsequently revises work;
- A3a: gathers information to assist in completing project work; A3c: uses word-processing software to produce a multi-page report;
- A4b Reviews his or her own progress in completing work activities and adjusts priorities as needed to meet deadlines:

These are only some of the standards that have been addressed in the past. The new GSEs present additional opportunities for creating extended tasks.

As you can see, developing extended tasks presents a wide range of opportunities for teachers and students to work on more extended, sophisticated projects and to use the task as a way to assess the work from this project once it is completed.

Tasks with a particular focus on Applied Learning steps
These tasks break down large pieces of extended work into smaller tasks.
When students embark on large, complex pieces of work (senior projects, science fair projects, research papers, etc.) they often go through a series of steps that are common to all forms of complex work. They:

- Identify a question, issue, or problem, of interest (A1b: E2a: E3a, etc.),
- Gather and analyze information that focuses and informs the initial interest (A2a: A3a: A3b, etc.),
- Use the focused interest to organize a process that will develop understanding and expertise in the area of interest (A1c: A4b: A4c, etc.),
- Reach conclusions, recommendations, proposals, etc. based on new information and expertise (E6b: E7b: A2b, etc.), and
- Present findings to a range of audiences to inform them and/or advocate further action (A2a: A2b: A2c, etc.).

While the steps outlined above may be common to a wide range of student work, the content of the work would vary from student to student. Consequently, tasks developed to assess this kind of proficiency would be content-free until the student supplied the content (see the document "Developing Capstone Preparation Tasks"). Once that was done, the tasks would be assessed by people with expertise **both** in the process described by the task **and** with the subject-area of the task.

Write new tasks. In some ways, this is the hardest way to create a new task. Before you set off in this direction, look at a blueprint to see where you need tasks (see "ELA &

Applied Learning Blueprint for Task Development"). Once you decide where you most need to develop a task, then you should be aware of the following list of ways to be successful in developing new tasks which include principles of Universal Design.

1. The task is aligned to a standard/expectation/GSE in a way that people see or readily agree to.

2. The task clearly specifies either 1) what the student needs to know or 2) what the student needs to be able to do with that knowledge (see the example "Exhibition Network Oral Presentation Rubric").

3. The task has scoring criteria that clearly define all the proficiencies a student needs to meet standard. When you develop a new task, be sure you are targeting a proficiency described by an identifiable standard or expectation. Since your task will be an **example** of this proficiency, check with others who are knowledgeable about the proficiency to be sure they agree your task assesses that proficiency.

4. The task must describe the difference between proficiency levels (e. g., the difference between meeting standard and nearly meeting the standard).

5. The task should only have requirements that are associated with the assessed proficiency(s), (not tasks requiring the student to extensively memorize, to use logic to try to understand unclear directions, to have an extensive or atypical vocabulary, etc.).

Here are some of the most important guidelines for developing new tasks.

6. When you review your prompt, be sure it clearly describes what a student needs to do to demonstrate a proficiency. A clear description means that the students will not be confused and that the student will interpret the directions in only one way (there are not two clear ways to do what the prompt instructs). The best way to find out whether your prompt and other instructions are clear is to ask students to read the prompt and instructions and tell you what they think they mean.

7. Make sure that the scoring criteria you write for assessing the task are all components of the major proficiency. Show the part of the rubric being discussed. When you develop your criteria, consult with colleagues who are knowledgeable about the proficiency you are assessing.

8. In order to clearly describe the difference between proficiency levels (e. g., the difference between meeting standard and nearly meeting the standard), you need to be careful to describe what students actually do at each of the performance levels. Avoid

qualifiers like "some", "skillfully, "sometimes". For further help, see the document "Guidelines for Judging Rubrics". Please provide a link to this document.

9. Outside of the proficiencies you are assessing, try to make your task as simple, straightforward and uncluttered as possible using the principles of Universal Design. Every time you write an instruction, make sure it is clear and concise. Every time you think about the vocabulary you use in your instructions and prompts, make sure it is the simplest and most commonly used way to express something. And, when you reflect on what you are asking students to do in the task, make sure that everything is clearly connected to a proficiency.

These guidelines do not assure that the task you write will be perfect. But it will help assure that it begins to do the things that good tasks do. In fact, our experience so far is that no task is ever "perfect". They are only usable or not usable, and the distinction is sometimes rather fine (see the documents "Judging the Validity of a Task"). The real point is to make sure you have time to review your tasks and to improve them over time. And the best way you can ensure that your task gets better is to include your colleagues—both in your school and in the Skills Network—in the review.

10. Consult the NSPS document for examples of tasks students could perform to meet specific standards (e. g., on page 26 there is an example of a task a student could do to show that s/he meets standards on E5a).

COMMON TASK TEMPLATE

Teachers creating common tasks should consider the following as essential components of a standards-based task. For an explanation of each box, please refer to the description above of the step indicated in each box.

CONTENT/PERFORMANCE STANDARDS AND INDICATORS	GRADE SPAN EXPECTATIONS **(as applicable)**
See step 1	See step 1

TEACHER DIRECTIONS

See steps 5 and 9

STUDENT DIRECTIONS

See steps 2 and 9

PROMPT

See steps 5, 6, and 9

EVALUATION RUBRIC

See steps 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8